Global elites at Davos can't just expect innovation to save our planet

Article (Published Version)

SUSTAINABILITY TIMES
Green news on tech, business and the environment

(https://www.sustainability-times.com/)

(https://www.facebook.com/SustainabilityTimes) (https://twitter.com/ST_Sustainable)
(/feed) (https://www.linkedin.com/company/sustainability-times/)

Global elites at Davos can't just expect innovation to save our planet

By Adrian Smith (https://www.sustainability-times.com/author/adrian-smith/)
on January 21, 2020

Davos season is upon us and the global elite has just jetted into the Swiss

resort to ski, nibble fondue (possibly) and try to solve all the world's problems in four days.

This year's 50th annual forum is entitled "Stakeholders for a Cohesive and Sustainable World" and participants will be looking for innovative ways to address the urgent climate and environmental challenges that are harming our global ecology and economy. In typically understated language the organizers are promising that in true Davos spirit, the meeting will generate the bold ideas and exciting opportunities needed to improve the state of our world.

If past Davoses are anything to go by, no doubt we will hear leaders and politicians pledge to direct the innovative dynamism of business towards solving society's most pressing problems. Welcome as this commitment is, those implicated in these challenges (citizens like you and me) need to question (again) whether this zeal for innovation is genuinely transformational, or merely providing a civilizing veneer over business as usual.

Indeed, innovation is on a mission these days. In the past year the EU has pledged to invest €100 billion in a new generation of "mission-oriented innovation" targeting climate change, smart cities, healthy oceans, coasts and waters, productive soils, food and health, and the fight against cancer. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development is also promoting renewed attention to challenge-led innovation. National governments, including the UK, are reorienting innovation policies along these lines, as are many city and regional authorities including the Mission Innovation initiative of the Global Covenant of Mayors.

There is a welcome appetite in these missions for experimenting with policy itself, and making the state much more dynamic and proactive in promoting innovation for public good. This will be vital because much of the day-to-day practice of innovation currently draws upon experience and knowledge accumulated in a world of economic growth at all costs. The purpose and practice of innovation (and poli er recent decades have been informed by short-time horizons, market-dominating competition, universal technological

frontiers, rentier intellectual property, and linear models of intensive production, accelerated consumption, and with careless disposal.

Which is to say, innovation has contributed to the mess we find ourselves in. Indeed, policy tools have promoted innovation on that basis. Even the cautious regulatory measures driving the environmental and social agenda to date have also tended to approach sustainability within these terms.

The new innovation missions are more ambitious. They emphasize new approaches to innovation, in partnership with business and with learning and adaption built into the mission so that business creativity is kept on track towards meeting the social challenge. Those with long memories will recall the public-private partnerships struck in the wake of the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002. Now, as then, cleaner technologies will undoubtedly result. Indeed, the new missionary direction should carry these solutions much further.

But now, as then, the critical question remains the same: whether and how these initiatives can escape the dominant political and economic drivers causing so much unsustainability, and instead accompany and support movements towards societies with ecological integrity and social justice at their heart (which were the defining principles agreed for sustainable development at the original Earth Summit in 1992).

Research on progress since Johannesburg indicates how relative environmental improvements from specific innovations struggle to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation. Marginal improvements become overwhelmed by aggregate increases in consumption and production, generated by a growth-dependent political economy of which these innovations are part and parcel. We also know now that so-called disruptive technologies can conserve the deeper social order, further marginalizing the socially excluded, unless integrated into proactive efforts for equality and social justice. Compare, for example, the early visions for an empowering cyberspace with the platform-enabled gig economy we have today.

It is salutary to recall how comm ace green innovations began life as

experimental practices within a counter-culture opposed to technocratic missions. Activists argued the centrally-conceived, top-down missions of the 1960s were pursuing the fallacy that technology-fixes could resolve social problems. Activist alternatives in renewable energy, agro-ecology, eco-housing, participatory design, socially useful production, appropriate technology, and more were conceived as devices for social changes towards new political and economic arrangements. It was alternative approaches to technology, and not simply green technology per se, that was critically important.

An aspiration to open up innovation to citizen participation was strong amongst these initiatives. And a democratizing impulse continues in countless initiatives today, from commons-based peer-production through community agriculture to the right to repair. That impulse generates novel practices for doing innovation differently by working to longer time-frames, thinking about broader systems, situated in the worlds people inhabit and aspire to, and caring about the social relations being cultivated. All of which is useful for the new innovation missions.

Significantly, many of these grassroots innovations also anticipate more convivial, commons-based societies, delivering material sufficiency under new conceptions of prosperity. And they are associated with social movements pushing for structural social changes that shift the conditions under which innovation arises. As such, these initiatives furnish practical knowledge important to the genuine challenge of building post-growth economies, and supporting people to get involved in designing the changes they aspire to live by together.

None of this is to deny the importance of the new innovation missionaries. Nor is it to claim the alternatives have all the answers. The privileges and resources represented at Davos will not be given away readily to grassroots innovators. Nor are idealistic grassroots activists likely to find the dry intricacies of policy intervention and business partnerships an exciting or credible draw into the new innovation missions. Such are the political contours of innovation for sustainability.

But right now, with our world on fire, we need both to work well – even though it is unlikely they will work well together.

MOST POPULAR

POST-PANDEMIC RECOVERY PLANS FAIL TO ADDRESS BIODIVERSITY LOSS (HTTPS://WWW.SUSTAINABILITY-TIMES.COM/ENVIRONMENTAL-PROTECTION/POST-PANDEMIC-ECONOMIC-PLANS-ARE-FAILING-TO-ADDRESS-BIODIVERSITY-LOSS/)
October 13, 2020

SKATEBOARDING IS FUN. IT CAN ALSO BE ECOFRIENDLY (HTTPS://WWW.SUSTAINABILITY-TIMES.COM/GREEN-CONSUMERISM/SKATEBOARDING-IS-FUN-IT-CAN-ALSO-BE-ECOFRIENDLY/)
April 16, 2020

WHAT TO DO WITH PLASTIC WASTE? A LOT, ACTUALLY (HTTPS://WWW.SUSTAINABILITY-TIMES.COM/ENVIRONMENTAL-PROTECTION/WHAT-TO-DO-WITH-PLASTIC-WASTE-A-LOT-ACTUALLY/)
April 23, 2020

SCIENTISTS IN FINLAND DEVELOP A PROMISING BEE VACCINE (HTTPS://WWW.SUSTAINABILITY-TIMES.COM/ENVIRONMENTAL-PROTECTION/SCIENTISTS-IN-FINLAND-DEVELOP-A-PROMISING-BEE-VACCINE/)
January 2, 2019

A NEW ARTIFICIAL LEAF COULD HELP US COMBAT CLIMATE CHANGE (HTTPS://WWW.SUSTAINABILITY-TIMES.COM/ENVIRONMENTAL-PROTECTION/A-NEW-ARTIFICIAL-LEAF-COULD-HELP-US-COMBAT-CLIMATE-CHANGE/)
November 12, 2019

Topics we care about

- Agriculture (https://www.sustainability-times.com/tag/agriculture/)
- Best Practices (https://www.sustainability-times.com/tag/best-practices/)
- Climate Change (https://www.sustainability-times.com/tag/climate-change/)
- CO2-Emissions (https://www.sustainability-times.com/tag/co2-emissions/)
- Coronavirus (https://www.sustainability-times.com/tag/coronavirus/)
- Electric Vehicles (https://www.sustainability-times.com/tag/electric-vehicles/)
- Fisheries (https://www.sustainability-times.com/tag/fisheries/)
- Food Security (https://www.sustainability-times.com/tag/food-security/)
- Forest (https://www.sustainability-times.com/tag/forest/)
- Natural preservation (https://www.sustainability-times.com/tag/natural-preservation/)
- Nuclear Energy (https://www.sustainability-times.com/tag/nuclear/)
- Plastics (https://www.sustainability-times.com/tag/plastics/)
- Policy (https://www.sustainability-times.com/tag/policy/)
- Pollution (https://www.sustainability-times.com/tag/pollution/)
- Power Use (https://www.sustainability-times.com/tag/power-use/)
- Recycling (https://www.sustainability-times.com/tag/recycling/)
- Renewables (https://www.sustainability-times.com/tag/renewables/)
- Solar (https://www.sustainability-times.com/tag/solar/)
- Supply Chains (https://www.sustainability-times.com/tag/supply-chains/)
- Sustainable Development (https://www.sustainability-times.com/tag/sustainable-development/)
- Sustainable Housing (https://www.sustainability-times.com/tag/sustainable-housing/)
- Transportation (https://www.sustainability-times.com/tag/transportation/)
- Venice (https://www.sustainability-times.com/tag/venice/)
- Waste Management (https://www.sustainability-times.com/tag/waste-management/)
- Water Supply (https://www.sustainability-times.com/tag/water-supply/)
- Wildlife (https://www.sustainability-times.com/tag/wildlife/)
- Wind (https://www.sustainability-times.com/tag/wind/)

Related Articles

The Conversation

October 12, 2020

The Conversation

October 7, 2020

The Conversation

September 29, 2020